

What's in a name? The world information sheet

Hemispheres

Lines of latitude and longitude (the Prime Meridian, International Date Line and Equator) are used to divide the world into hemispheres:

- the 'Western hemisphere' is the area to the west of the Prime Meridian. It includes South America and North America
- the 'Eastern hemisphere' lies to the east of the Prime Meridian. It includes Asia
- the 'Southern hemisphere' lies south of the Equator. It includes southern Africa, Australasia, South America and Antarctica
- the 'Northern hemisphere' is the area north of the Equator. It includes Europe, North America and Asia.

Regions

The term 'region' can apply to different geographical scales: it can mean areas within a country, areas within a continent and areas of the world. Geographical regions can be 'cross-national', describing areas that cover two or more countries or most of a continent.

Well-known cross-national regions include 'the Arctic' and 'the Caribbean'. Other regions can be based on topography e.g. 'the Himalayas', 'the Amazon basin' or economic and political lines, e.g. the European Union.

Some regions are named after the main biome, climate or vegetation, these environmental regions, include 'the Pampas', 'the Prairies' and 'Temperate forests'.

Regions can be geographically confusing 'where does southern Africa end?' and 'how many islands make up Oceania?'

The terms 'The North' and 'The South' are confusing, because we can also use them to talk about the economic status of areas of the world rather than accurate geographical positions:

- 'The North' tends to refer to Europe, North America, Russia and Australia and New Zealand (although nowadays it can include countries such as China and Brazil)
- 'The South' encompasses the countries of Africa; central, southern and eastern Asia (from Turkey to Vietnam) and South America.

Map views

The map view we most commonly use in the UK shows north at the 'top' of the map. Other world maps have south at the 'top'. A well-known version of has Australia towards the top, Antarctica across the top and Asia at the bottom of the map. This worldview seems peculiar to those of us living in the northern hemisphere.

Over the centuries, cartographers based their maps on information supplied by explorers from European countries. The explorers often 'claimed' other parts of the world on behalf of their home country, so what is now known as a 'Eurocentric view' is unsurprising, but it does not mean it should not be challenged. Other countries centre their world maps on their continent, for example, the Americas are central to America-centric views.